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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 000672

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SUBJECT: PM DEUBA FACES DOWN MOUNTING OPPOSITION, CRITICISM

REF: KATHMANDU 0485

Classified By: AMB MICHAEL E. MALINOWSKI. REASON: 1.5(B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Ever-present rumors that former Prime Minister and ruling Nepali Congress Party President Girija Prasad Koirala continues to plot the political downfall of sitting PM Sher Bahadur Deuba have increased in virulence after a three-day Opposition boycott of Parliament and multi-partisan discontent at Deuba's perceived failures, including an inability to control the Royal Nepal Army (RNA). While there is doubtless some truth in such criticisms--especially those citing the PM's inability to provide a new vision since the collapse of dialogue with the Maoists November 23--the real reason has more to do with Koirala's continued efforts to undermine his long-time political rival's position and with others smelling the blood in the water. The PM appears to have faced down the immediate threat for now, but absent an appreciable improvement in the security situation, we expect the "Dump Deuba" drumbeat to continue. End summary.

THE AXE ABOVE DEUBA'S HEAD

2. (C) Ever-present rumors that former Prime Minister and ruling Nepali Congress Party President Girija Prasad Koirala continues to plot the political downfall of sitting PM Sher Bahadur Deuba have increased in virulence. Members of the Nepali Congress, including some not habitually associated with the Koirala camp, have assured us on several recent occasions that they have sufficient support to win a vote of no confidence against Deuba in Parliament. Govinda Raj Joshi, a former Home Minister and long-time Koirala stalwart, told poloff Opposition Members of Parliament, including the small, left-wing National People's Front and United People's Front, have expressed dissatisfaction with Deuba and asked the ruling party to bring a vote of no confidence to oust him. Joshi also claimed that a majority of district party presidents, in Kathmandu for an April 1 meeting, complained of the continued lack of security confronting them in outlying areas, said they felt abandoned by the present government, and made a similar request. Arjun Narasingh K.C., Nepali Congress Party Spokesman, confirmed to the Ambassador discussion of such a plan, but stressed that he and others in the party were trying to convince Koirala to hold off until after the state of emergency runs out at the end of May. Chin Kaji Shrestha, a former NC MP from Gorkha, also asserted that enough pro-Koirala votes were already lined up to dump Deuba.

3. (C) On March 27 members of the local NGO Human Rights Organization of Nepal (HURON) told poloff that the Koirala camp had already secured the tacit support of the main Opposition party, the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (UML) and the third largest party, the Rastriya Prajatantra Pakshye (RPP) to dump Deuba. They alleged RPP President and former PM Surya Bahadur Thapa had confirmed the planned move to them. (Note: No one in either the UML or RPP has confirmed such a plan to us. Indeed, RPP MP Pashupati Rana told the Ambassador that he saw no realistic alternative to Deuba as PM. End note.) According to HURON, the Opposition parties believe that Deuba is unable to exercise effective control over the RNA and are increasingly unhappy with the Army's performance in outlying districts--including alleged harassment of their activists--during the state of emergency. Bharat Man Adhikari, a UML MP, while not explicitly confirming that his party had been approached by Koirala, said he understood some NC MPs were collecting signatures against Deuba. He noted to poloff the UML's concern at the perceived lack of civilian control over the RNA. The way the Constitution is written, the RNA's primary allegiance is to the King, Adhikari concluded, and not to the Parliamentary democracy. (Note: RNA officers' formal oath is also to the King. End note.) In general, he faulted Deuba for failing to come up with workable socio-economic programs to address the grievances of the poor. A journalist echoed some of these criticisms in private, saying Deuba seems to lack the vision for a

comprehensive program to lead Nepal into a better future. Policy-making is ad hoc at best and non-existent at worst. The continued lack of civilian government presence in Maoist-affected districts has also hurt Deuba, the journalist observed, undermining critical support among the beleaguered district party chairmen in these embattled outposts.

RANA REMARKS RANKLE

14. (U) A March 27 speech given by Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Prajwalla SJB Rana to graduates of the command and staff training college in Kathmandu apparently only aggravated some politicians' displeasure with the military leadership. In his comments, which received wide coverage in the local media, Rana castigated politicians of all parties for what he viewed as their failure to provide adequate democratic leadership. According to translated excerpts from his speech, Rana demanded, "Who brought the nation to its present condition? Is this the creation of bad governance, or is it something the army has done? . . . In a country where there is a democracy, elected people's representatives and an elected majority government, can the state of emergency be declared just because the army wants it? . . . Is it right to blame the Royal Nepalese Army, the protector of national security, for a situation which is the result of 12 years of political factors?" Stating that the RNA is fulfilling its duties in protecting the country, Rana questioned why representatives from Maoist-affected areas were not visiting their constituencies, and criticized them for "not helping the security forces in the campaign against terrorists in their constituencies."

15. (U) Rana went on to lambaste politicians for playing "selfish games of factional dominance" at a time of national crisis. Only the Prime Minister and some of the younger ministers give the RNA the support it needs, Rana charged. Acknowledging that "there may have been some lapses on our side," Rana maintained that in general the RNA was sensitive to the need "that innocent people should not suffer any losses." Addressing members of the media, he appealed to them "to ensure a sense of security to all citizens" and "help raise the morale of the army." "False" and/or "confusing" news items might have "a negative impact on the trust and confidence that we have earned from the Nepali people," he warned, concluding that "in this time of crisis it is necessary to keep our differences on hold." (Note: Two journalists, whose cases had attracted wide and generally unfavorable coverage, had just been released from RNA custody the previous day. End note.)

BOYCOTTS R US: OPPOSITION WALKS OUT OF PARLIAMENT;
SHUNS ALL-PARTY MEETING CALLED BY DEUBA

16. (U) Many perceived Rana's speech as a direct slap at Koirala, who was PM for many of the 12 years of Nepal's democracy. Rana was also likely responding in part to ongoing, increasingly public criticism from Opposition parties and the pro-Koirala faction of the Nepali Congress Party of the RNA's performance under the emergency thus far. On March 25 and 26 the five MPs from the far left-wing National People's Front walked out of Parliament in protest of the March 14 killings of three of their party activists after their arrests by the RNA in a jungle in Argal, Baglung District. (Note: The official Ministry of Defense press release described the dead men as Maoists. End note.) Other Opposition MPs accused the RNA of committing "excesses" under the emergency, including extra-judicial killings of civilians wrongly suspected of being Maoists. Following Rana's remarks, Opposition MPs staged a three-day boycott of Parliament March 28-30, demanding Deuba, as Minister of Defense, seek clarification from the Army Chief. Also at issue, according to several Opposition MPs, were Deuba's lack of progress on his promise to review proposals for constitutional amendments (Ref A) and the GON's failure to exempt mainstream political parties' meetings from the ban on public assemblies during the emergency. Opposition parties also boycotted an all-party meeting called by Deuba March 27 to discuss both the upcoming April 2-6 general strike called by the Maoists and proposed constitutional amendments. Before walking out March 29, Opposition MPs (along with some in the Nepali Congress) took turns denouncing COAS Rana for his remarks and PM Deuba for not denouncing Rana. (The PM was not in Parliament to hear these sentiments; he was traveling in the Western region with the King and the controversial Army Chief, giving rise to the inevitable conclusion among some, including in the NC, that a "conspiracy" was afoot.) Opposition Leader Madhav Nepal was particularly incensed, describing Deuba as no more than a "robot" running "a puppet government."

17. (U) On March 31 Koirala called an all-party meeting at the NC central office, which, in contrast to the March 27

meeting called by Deuba, the Opposition attended. The put-out party leaders agreed to demand an explanation from Rana, via the PM, of his "objectionable" remarks, but stopped short of calling for Deuba's resignation.

DEUBA "CAUTIONS" ARMY CHIEF;
CALMS MIFFED MPS

18. (U) After his return from the West, on April 1 the PM issued a statement "cautioning" the Army Chief to remember that "the Royal Nepal Army is a non-political body" and should stay out of politics. At the same time, Deuba commended the RNA for its efforts to support and defend multi-party democracy, which he described as under siege from the Maoists. The PM also issued the desired directives allowing political party meetings and sent them to the King for approval. On the same day, Rana appeared before indignant members of the State Affairs Committee in Parliament for three hours to explain himself. Lawmakers emerged from that session mollified, with one reporting that Rana had said his comments were misunderstood.

19. (C) RPP MP Pashupati Rana told Ambassador April 3 that Deuba had cleverly worked out a compromise, with clearance from the King, between the Army Chief and the Opposition Leader on the language of the statement. The Nepali word for "caution" carries a somewhat stronger connotation than in English so that the MPs read Deuba's comparatively anodyne statement on the Army Chief's comments as a rebuke. The RPP's Rana sees Deuba's hand as now strengthened by his ability to emerge unscathed from the contretemps. For now, the seething controversy sparked by the Army Chief's remarks, which had managed to push the looming, potentially disastrous five-day Maoist strike completely out of the headlines, has rapidly fizzled out.

COMMENT

10. (C) Koirala may criticize Deuba's failure to exert control over the RNA, but his own abysmal relations with the RNA during his last tenure as PM helped contribute to his eventual decision to resign. The Army would be unlikely to welcome Koirala back as PM--which not-too subtle message the Army Chief may have been trying to convey in his public comments. Rana has come under increasing heat in recent days for alleged excesses by the RNA in the field; his remarks may also have been intended in part to deflect some of that. But some of his criticisms--especially about the chronic lack of political unity at times of national crisis--are right on target, as was so aptly demonstrated by the MPs' histrionic, self-absorbed over-reaction that preoccupied Parliamentary proceedings to the exclusion of other pressing issues, such as the impending Maoist strike, that threaten the nation. At the same time, some of the growing criticisms of Deuba, such as his all-too apparent lack of vision on how to address long-standing socio-economic grievances the Maoists play upon, also have some truth. The real reason behind any move to dump Deuba, however, likely has more to do with Koirala's habitual efforts to come back into power--and with opportunists in the Opposition and the ruling party smelling the blood in the water-- than with any particular dissatisfaction with Deuba. For now, Deuba appears to have dodged this bullet, but Koirala can be counted on, as always, to keep trying.

MALINOWSKI